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ABSTRACT

Journal writing has been used for a long time in the classroom as a part of an integrated approach to teaching literature. There are several different types of journals: (1) reading response journals, in which students react to what they have read; (2) lifebooks, which are similar to diaries or personal journals; and (3) dialog journals, in which the student and teacher converse in writing. A study attempted to determine how students assess the effectiveness of journals. A total of 77 ninth and tenth graders from a rural New York high school completed a survey during a 40-minute period. Results showed that most students not only found journals to be worthwhile, but also believed they helped them in various other aspects of the English curriculum. One student wrote, "Writing Journals help me to express myself in ways I have never done before. I can get my feelings out on paper much better." In random interviews after the administration of the survey, students reported that journal writing was only worthwhile if it allowed for personal reflections from time to time not necessarily related to the assigned reading; and if they were certain the teacher was reading their entries. (One table of data is included, and an appendix contains the survey.) (TB)

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Running Head: WRITING JOURNALS: A WRITING MOTIVATOR?

ED 385 848

Early Secondary Students' Views on the Writing Journal's Ability To be a Self Motivator in Writing

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Abstract

The viewpoints of early secondary education students (Grades 9 and 10) concerning the effectiveness of writing journals as self motivators in writing were investigated. The students' viewpoints were determined by the completion of a five question, written reponse survey. The results indicated that writing journals, as a whole, were considered to be worthwhile and did act as a motivator for students to write. The findings seem to fall into line with educational research which states that students need to become personally involved within the scope of the classroom in order to make learning more worthwhile.

Early Secondary Students' Views on the Writing Journal's Ability To be a Self Motivator in Writing

by Marie E. Skerritt

One of a teacher's primary concerns is to find ways to inspire students to want to learn. A central belief is that genuine learning can only occur when the students have a positive and willing attitude about the material they are presented. When students do not have a real interest in what is going on in the classroom, the most the teacher can probably expect is rote memorization. Most teachers, it would seem, should have higher goals and aspirations for their students. Teachers want students to move beyond the mere recall of facts, and to begin to move into the world of higher order and creative thinking. Facts are important, of course, but it is what students can do with these facts that will determine their success in the real world.

Reading and writing, as everyone knows, is critical for students to succeed in as well. Yet, these subject areas are where most students become disillusioned. Many students fail to see the importance of reading and writing because most students do not see a connection: both between the two subject areas, and how the subjects relate to them on a personal level. Words that are typically used by students to describe reading and writing include: boring, difficult, and unrelated.

In order for this belief to be turned around, teachers need to start making more of a connection between reading, writing, and students' lives. As stated in the opening of this piece, attitude can make or break a student's desire to learn. The first step in creating this desire to learn is by personalizing instruction to the student's wants and needs. Once students

begin to see how *they* fit into the world of reading and writing, it is likely that they will take a more serious look at how the world of reading and writing fits into their lives.

While most teachers understand the need for students to have a personal interest in order to learn, many may not know exactly how to unlock that mysterious door as to how to achieve this. Many theories and suggestions have developed over the years as to how to "hook" the students into learning. Yet, with all the apparent tricks of the trade, success has tended to be minimal in boosting the students' desire to learn reading and writing.

Presently, teachers are starting to look back on some of the more standard practices in the classroom to see if these things can be upgraded to motivate students to learn. One such practice that has regained considerable attention is the writing journal. Writing journals have been used for a long time in the classroom as a part of an integrated approach to teaching literature. Simpson (1986) states the following, "An integrated approach. . . sharing literature through oral reading, written responses, and voluntary comments, might be an important ingredient in encouraging the development of a literate community in the classroom."

Connecting reading and writing in more meaningful ways. . . this is a goal that teachers of all grade levels want to attain within their classrooms. This goal was set even before the advent of integrated curricula and the whole language approach. There is little question concerning the effectiveness of combining reading and writing in order to improve not only comprehension, but overall communication, as well.

The implementation of student writing journals in the classroom seems to be one way in which teachers are trying to make that reading and writing connection. One question that should be asked is, "How do writing journals help students become more involved in what they are reading and writing?" One answer is that when students write about what they read or experience, they activate their metacognitive skills. "Once readers know when they do or do not understand text, they can use strategies to resolve comprehension" (Stewart and Tei, 1989). This active form of learning allows students to become directly involved with the material they are presented; and active--or hands on--learning is far more potent than learning from simply reading a text silently.

Journals can be used within a classroom in a variety of ways. The following are only a few suggestions that have been implemented and researched in various classroom settings:

> **Reading Response Journals:** This is a generic name for the type of journals in which students write down *reactions* to what they have read. The word *reaction* is emphasized because it is important that students write their feelings and opinions about a given piece, not merely a summary of what happened in the piece (Browning, 1986). By moving beyond the summary-writing stage, students begin to engage themselves more into the interpretive and critical levels of learning, thinking, and comprehension. This is where full interaction with the text begins to take place. In these reaction-type journals, students

may directly respond to what they are reading. One teacher used these journals in her remedial classroom in order to boost interest in reading:

> The more book talks I did, the more books ended up in the students' hands. . . Their journals suggested that they were thinking ahead and looking forward to other books. .. they identified elements of the writing that they liked or found helpful and writing styles that they disliked or that got in the way of their reading (Dionisio, 1989).

In this case, the teacher combined reading, writing, and oral expression to stimulate student interest. And, as an end result, the students' journals began to reflect this newfound sense of responsibility and desire to learn. The journal proved to be a very effective outlet for the students' sudden burst of literary criticism.

Lifebooks: This is a relative new term for what used to be called Daily or Personal Journals. While lifebooks may resemble diaries or personal journals in the fact that the student can write whatever they want in them, whenever they want to, there are a few subtle differences. First, lifebooks are meant to be carried around with the students in order for them to catch those personal "a-ha" moments--

whether it be something they see, something they hear, or something they feel. In all actuality, this book is not meant to be evaluated, only to be shared by the student and his/her discretion. This can be a good way to get the students to write, because it is based solely on what interests the student. There are not any guidelines to this book, no set structures. The format is entirely up to the student, and that is what makes it so wonderful! (French, 1994)

Dialogue Journals: Many researchers have said that they find it strange that we don't teach students how to read and write in the same way we teach them how to talk. In other words, when children learn how to talk, it is in their natural environment, and therefore, more than likely, talking comes easier to a child. In contrast, though, students learn how to read in a very structured and possibly disjointed environment. These researchers believe that language "cannot be taught in the traditional sense; it must be learned through extensive exposure to and practical experience with the use of language in actual, natural context and situations" (Falk, 1979). This is where the dialogue journal comes into the picture. Stated simply, the dialogue journal is a book in which the student and teacher converse in writing. Every day, the students can write in their dialogue journals about anything they want to write about. They turn in their journals to the teacher, who then responds to what is written. The

following is a brief excerpt from a dialogue journal entry and the teacher's response:

Student: I like to play silent speed ball.

Teacher: What is silent speed ball? Your puppets are so cute, especially the one in the blue suit.

What is so unique about these journals is that the student gets a direct response to what they have written. Additionally, their writing is never edited, yet the teacher DOES model correct spelling, punctuation, and mechanics. This type of journal encourages both reading and writing through the anticipation felt by both parties to read and respond to what is in the journal (Gambrell, 1985).

Of course, journal writing is not always so well-received. While journal writing may sound like a "cure-all" for the monotony of essay assignment, many teachers will say that journal writing, in order to be done effectively takes up a great deal of time--time which they do not really have, especially in a secondary setting. One teacher told the researcher, "I try to put a variation on the way I do journals; I know the kids get bored with it. But, I simply don't have time to sit down and have a personal react to every journal--so, usually by the middle of the school year, the notebooks just sit in lockers or in desks, and I end up frustrated and feeling like I've failed."

Based upon published research, students need to feel as though they have a sense of "ownership", at least as far as writing assignments go. Teachers, by simply giving rote-

memorization essays as a form of assessment or discussion seem to be underestimating their students' potential. But, how do students in today's classrooms feel about this? Do they see journals as a worthwhile and meaningful addition to their English classroom, or merely another waste of time?

Through this study, it was my intention to identify students' views on the implementation of writing journals within the classroom. Participants in the study were asked to complete a brief survey (constructed by myself--see APPENDIX 1) and return it to me at the end of the class session. If it is assumed that the educational research that is published concerning writing journals is correct, then the students surveyed should feel that writing journals provide them with a sense of ownership concerning their responses, and therefore, be a writing motivator.

Method

Participants

A total of 77 ninth and tenth graders from a rural, New York high school participated in the study (55 ninth grade students covering all performance levels: remedial to honors; and 22 tenth graders, consisting of only the honors section). The identity of the students was kept confidential, with the exception of the student's grade level. Division between the various performance levels was also not done; all ninth graders were calculated together and all tenth graders were calculated together.

Materials

A brief survey to be completed by the ninth and tenth grade English classes of a small, rural, New York State public high school that has used journals in the classroom for at least 5 years (See APPENDIX 1).

Procedure

The students were given the survey at the onset of their English class period. Students were informed that the responses were confidential and the students were expected to complete the survey in complete sentences. Students had the entire class period--40 minutes (if needed) to complete the survey. As soon as the surveys were completed, students placed their survey into the appropriate manila envelope, marked either GRADE 9 or GRADE 10.

Results

The results to the survey were as follows:

Grade Level	Motivating?	*% Total	Not Motivating?	*% Total	Not Sure	* % Total
9th	36	*65.45*	15	*27.28*	4	*7.27*
*10th***	16	*72.73*	3	*13.64*	3	*13.63*

*** Indicates that % was calculated from Total Responses from Grade Level Only**	****Indicates that Responses were limited to Honors Section Only**	**Total Responses from 9th Grade**	**55**	**Total Response from 10th Grade**	**22**
		GRAND TOTAL			**77**

Discussion

The results of this survey seem to corroborate the claims of the researchers concerning journals having the potential to affect the reading and writing attitudes of students. The overwhelming majority of students surveyed said that they found journals not only to be worthwhile in a classroom environment, but that journals also helped them in various other aspects of their English class curriculum. The following are some brief excerpts pulled randomly from the sample:

"Writing Journals help me to express myself in ways I have never done before. I can get my feelings out on paper much better." (Grade 9 student)

"Journalism is good because I can share my personal feelings about the books I read in class--it's better than just telling what happened in the story." (Grade 10 student)

"Journals help me to organize my thoughts and my words. I can read something, and then I can sit down and write about what I just read." (Grade 9 student)

As a sidebar, I found it interesting to note that in a random oral interview conducted after the survey was completed, students who felt that the writing journals were motivating and worthwhile only thought so if 1. The responses did not deal solely with the read material in class--in other words, if the journals were simply literature response journals, that they were not as worthwhile as a intermix with a personal journal entry from time to time; and, 2. The responses were looked at by the instructor. As one student responded, "If the teacher doesn't care what I write, then why should I?"

In this article, a number of suggestions have been offered in order to help teachers assist in motivating their students to read and write. According to both published researchers and the students surveyed for this piece, journals can be a very powerful tool in assisting teachers with this difficult task. The reason why student journals are so powerful is because of their flexibility. Journals can be used for general or specific tasks, and they can be personal or assignment-oriented. Yet, no matter how the journals are implemented, it is important to keep in mind that in order to obtain the desired motivation, the journals should always be student-centered. The real-world connection for today's students is essential in order to pique their interests. In a world filled with state-of-the-art multi-media, reading and writing tends to be uninteresting for our students. Educators, must emphasize the tremendous importance of reading and writing to them by setting an example. If teachers can show how reading and writing not only are linked to a successful future, but also that there are some interesting ways in which we can approach these subjects, then perhaps we can grab the attention of these students. Only then can teachers do the job that they are supposed to do: give students the keys to unlock their own doors to success.

APPENDIX 1

Survey: Journals

PLEASE GIVE A SERIOUS OPINION

You do not have to sign your name!

1. How did journal writing help you?

2. What is one good feature of journal writing?

3. In your opinion, which is better: writing an essay about a given topic or analyzing your day/week? Why?

4. Has journal writing motivated you to write more than a typical essay? Why or why not?

5. Give any recommendations you have for using journals in class.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR RESPONSES!!!!

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